

## Small-scale civil society and social policy

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research

**Small-scale civil society and social policy: the importance of experiential learning, insider knowledge and diverse motivations in shaping community action**

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Interest in the formal voluntary sector and wider civil society organisations (CSOs) has grown in recent years and now CSOs are viewed as key to delivering government policy agendas of social action, open public services and localism. This article uses data from 29 interviews with community activists, policy makers and voluntary sector experts to explore the role, function and workings of small-scale civil society organisations (SCSOs). It finds that small-scale activity often emerges as an emotional response to local need, shared interest or the desire for social interaction rather than in response to policy initiatives. SCSOs call on a wide range of resources garnered within their community of geography or of interest. They thrive in unregulated environments providing flexible and holistic services for people in need. The article argues that the co-option of such activities into the delivery of political agendas is unlikely to achieve policy goals.

**key words** civil society • policy • services • motivations • community

**Introduction**

Interest in the role, function and efficacy of the voluntary sector and wider civil society organisations (CSOs) has grown in recent years and spans the developed world. Civil society is often seen as having the potential to meet a wide range of social, policy and economic goals (Harris and Rochester, 2001; HM Treasury, 2002; Toepler, 2003). Substantial knowledge has accumulated about aspects of formal voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations (Kendall, 2003). The development of the mixed economy of welfare offered a role for CSOs in many social policy areas (Home Office, 2005; Powell, 2007). With the onset of global recession, and introduction of austerity measures, further potential roles have been outlined for CSOs; for example, taking on the management of local assets and public services. In the United States, CSOs are often seen as a grassroots solution to the failure of government and the market (Toepler, 2003), while in the United Kingdom (UK), the development of the ‘Big Society’ and, subsequently, ideologies of social action, open public services and localism has further raised the profile of CSOs and their assumed, if contested,

potential to both meet diverse needs and address democratic deficit (Cabinet Office, 2010a, 2010b; Coote, 2010; Ishkanian and Szreter, 2012).

This continuing policy interest in the role of VCS organisations raises questions about their capacity or willingness to respond to those expectations (Harris and Young, 2010), **[[please supply reference]]** which have yet to be investigated empirically. There is an existing body of knowledge that focuses on formal CSOs, largely consisting of registered charities and other regulated bodies such as community interest companies. Yet small, informal CSOs (SCSOs), as unincorporated associations, are argued to represent the largest part of civil society (Kane et al, 2013). Despite assumptions made that such CSOs have the potential to address a wide range of policy concerns (see Phillimore and McCabe, 2009), there has been little research in this field. Indeed, where such work has been undertaken, it has tended to be with small, if vulnerable, community-based organisations with paid staff – and often, historically, funded through area-based initiatives such as the Urban Programme and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, rather than on **[[Change ‘on’ to ‘through’? May need rewording slightly]]** informal (ie, unregulated) community activism (Milbourne, 2013). Policy assumptions about the role of SCSOs therefore lack a systematic evidence base.

This article examines the capacity and willingness of SCSOs to respond to developing policy agendas using the perspectives of intermediaries working closely with SCSOs and brings new knowledge about the nature of SCSOs in the UK and how they form, learn, work and develop. It contends that SCSOs offer a wide range of distinctive activities tailored to the needs of different individuals and groups. The article concludes that there is some potential for SCSOs to address policy concerns and, in particular, provide an outlet for social action. However, such activities are distributed unevenly because of unequal access to resources (Clifford et al, 2013) and their dependence on organic social action emerging from the personal motivations of volunteers and activists rather than any ‘top-down’ agenda.

## Small-scale civil society organisations

Interest in SCSOs cuts across all political parties and wide-ranging policy concerns (McCabe and Phillimore, 2010). Under New Labour administrations this coincided with investments in small organisations to develop their capacity to address specific policy concerns such as building social capital, increasing community cohesion and supporting neighbourhood regeneration (Taylor, 2012). There are just over 200,000 CSOs known to regulatory bodies in the UK (NCVO, 2009 **[[please supply reference]]**; Kane et al, 2013). Defining what is meant by SCSOs is not straightforward and is discussed in some depth in Phillimore and McCabe (2009). Herein, SCSOs are defined as unregistered CSOs. It is difficult to make definitive claims about the number of SCSOs in the UK (Phillimore and McCabe, 2009). MacGillivray et al (2001), the New Economics Foundation (cited in NCVO, 2009) and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO, 2009) estimate that there around 900,000 SCSOs. While data about the extent of activity are tentative, it is clear that SCSOs significantly outnumber formal CSOs.

Knowledge about SCSOs is underdeveloped and there is a clear lack of empirical evidence, with Toepler (2003: 236) arguing that this knowledge deficit is ‘perhaps one of the few remaining big mysteries’ in civil society research. Indeed, the Community

Sector Coalition (undated) has argued that, in terms of both academic and policy understandings, community activism (rather than formalised community-based organisations) has been and remains *Unseen, unequal, untapped...*

In the last decade there has been a growing body of literature on the problems and challenges faced by smaller, community-based, formalised organisations (Rochester, 2000). **[[missing reference ~ or did you mean to cite 2013?]]** These include problems associated with low levels of funding, expertise, sustainability and a lack of policy influence (Holland and Ritvo, 2008; Thompson, 2008). Under New Labour in the UK there was a plethora of policy statements and initiatives to address these perceived deficits:

- from *An action plan for community empowerment: Building on success* (CLG, 2007a) through to *Communities in control* (CLG, 2008);
- from the development of community empowerment networks to specific (formal, voluntary-sector-focused) ‘capacity-building’ programmes such as ChangeUp.

Ironically, there is very limited evidence that such investment in support and infrastructure stimulated new levels of community activism (NAO, 2009). **[[please supply reference]]** Equally, assertions that the ‘big state’ has crowded out community action seem unfounded judging by both international and national data (Hackl et al, 2009; Bartels et al, 2011). Thus, there is evidence of a disconnect between policy statements and the realities ‘on the ground’.

Following the 2010 General Election and the emergence of the coalition government, there was a renewed, if somewhat re-focused, policy interest in SCSOs. Under the Big Society agenda, such groups would be instrumental in ‘rolling back the state’, playing a greater role in the mixed economy of welfare and rebalancing the relationship between the state and people (Chanan and Miller, 2010). At the same time, much of the national and regional infrastructure aimed at supporting community action and present sectoral voice, **[[unclear ~ please reword as necessary]]** through strategic partnership arrangements with government, has been removed.

Subsequently, community organisations have been seen as key actors in addressing (or mitigating) the impact of austerity measures, developing open public services, managing public assets and, within the terms of the Localism Act 2011, returning power to communities (McClean and Dellott, 2011). More recently, community organisations, and the social capital they are assumed to engender, have been viewed as a mechanism for health promotion at a grassroots level – the assumption being that increasing community activity will reduce demand for acute health and social welfare interventions, resulting in savings to the public purse (DH, 2012; Fox, 2013). **[[please supply Fox reference]]**

These moves have been underpinned by a belief that SCSOs have the potential to use local knowledge to deliver services more effectively within their own communities. Communities and Local Government (CLG, 2007b: 1) argues that SCSOs ‘help deliver social capital, social cohesion and democratic participation. Better public investment in the sector will result in a better quality of life for local people and local communities, partly through their own direct activities and partly through their interaction with public services.’

The idea that SCSOs might offer an outlet for action that provides both a voice for communities and responsive services has also come to the fore (Wuthnow, 2004;

OCS, 2010). Building on the ideas of Freire (1970) and Alinsky (1971), it has been argued that through working within SCSOs, communities can be equipped with skills, knowledge, power and control to enable them to address the perceived democratic deficit, improve quality of life and have services able to meet local need more effectively than those organised by local policy makers. Such an approach has become part of government policy, with key actors making grand statements claiming that there is no limit to voluntary and community sector capacity to transform deprived areas (CLG, 2010).

This period of rapid change for the voluntary sector as a whole has been examined in both the academic and practice literature. At a macro level, Mohan (2012) argues that the concept of the 'Big Society' is predicated on an assumption that there is an unlimited pool of volunteers in communities and society at large: an assumption not supported empirically. Others (Richardson, 2012a, 2012b) suggest that there is an expandable pool of voluntary labour. At a more practice-based level there has been substantial research into the impact on VCOs of austerity measures in terms of practice and values and their responses to these measures (Milbourne, 2013; Rochester, 2013). However, as noted, the majority of that literature has focused on impact in terms of the funded and formalised voluntary sector or specific types of SCSOs, for example refugee groups and faith-based organisations (Kent, 2011; ROTA, 2011; Davidson and Packman, 2012).

There are further shortcomings within research in the field. Studies of the role, impact and function of SCSOs are often undertaken by local actors and findings rarely enter the public domain. In the absence of robust empirical evidence, views about SCSO activity depend on the theoretical or political outlook. Some argue that SCSOs make a marginal contribution to service provision (Toepler, 2003), instead driven by ideology or the need for solidarity (Barnes et al, 2006). Others contend that SCSOs provide valuable services and innovative approaches to reach marginalised groups (Boateng, 2002). Still others argue that, while community groups may play an important role in addressing the impact of welfare reform, they lack the resources and capacity to effectively respond to rising levels of need (Newcastle CVS, 2012). Such evidence as there is about the limitations of SCSO action have not deterred policy makers from encouraging SCSOs to increase their role in delivering across policy agendas.

If anything, this burden of policy expectation on small-scale community groups has increased since the 2010 General Election. These groups were already expected to build community cohesion and combat violent extremism (Cooper, 2008) but now, as the thresholds for accessing health and social care are raised, they are additionally expected to contribute to both individual and whole population health and wellbeing (GCPH, 2012; DH, 2013). With the move towards localism, away from centralised approaches to addressing social problems and the extension of community rights – to challenge, manage and buy – it is more important than ever to explore the capacity of SCSOs to meet need and the mechanisms by which SCSOs could be encouraged to act.

This is particularly the case when criticisms of the direction of government policy towards SCOs in general, and SCSOs in particular, is taken into account. The interest in localism, in extending community rights under the Localism Act 2011, is said to be a smoke screen for cuts to services (Coote, 2010; Ishkanian and Szeter, 2012) and funding regimes are 'reshaping' parts of the sector – away from advocacy and into service delivery (Aitken, 2014: 28). The timescales for communities to exercise their

right to challenge, manage, buy and engage in asset transfer are unrealistic (Derounian, 2014). Further, it is argued, these 'extended' community rights will increase inequalities. CSOs in wealthier communities have the resources to respond in ways that poorer communities may not (Taylor, 2012). Finally, critics of governmental policy towards SCSOs (under both New Labour and the coalition government) point out that concepts of community and civil society are only invoked when they conform to the dominant political discourse and are dismissed when critical of policy (Shaw, 2007), as in the case of current controversies around the growth of food banks across the UK.

## Methods

In response to the gaps in knowledge about SCSOs, we sought to undertake semi-structured interviews with the aim of exploring the nature, role and function of SCSOs, and claims of distinctiveness in relation to formal (ie, registered) CSOs, and consider their capacity to respond to emerging policy agendas. In order to identify interviewees, the research team of five people drafted a list of organisations and individuals known to be active in the field. Our focus was on respondents who supported or researched SCSOs and who had themselves played a role in running SCSOs in addition to operating in their current, more strategic role. This meant that we were able to simultaneously access an overview of experiences in the field in which they were operating as well as specific experiences from their own individual interests. Given that SCSOs are incredibly diverse in terms of structure, organisation, activities undertaken and communities served, we adopted a maximum variation sampling approach (Patton, 2001), including individuals with wide-ranging experiences covering different types of SCSOs and serving different kinds of communities. We placed a particular emphasis on the types of organisations often excluded from research on civil society, which has tended to focus on professionalised, white middle-class run organisations engaged in contracting and the delivery of public services (Benson, 2014). This purposive sampling suits diverse small sample sizes with limited population information and enables the drawing of tentative generalisations on the basis that if themes repeatedly emerge across different respondents they are likely to be indicative of key commonalities (Patton, 2001).

Each individual was approached via telephone or email and a follow-up telephone call in which we explained in more detail that we were seeking to undertake interviews exploring the role and function of SCSOs. All but three interviews were undertaken face to face. A degree of snowball sampling was undertaken whereby respondents were asked to recommend others for interview. Informed consent was achieved through discussing the nature and purpose of the project, opportunities to ask questions and the researcher and respondent signing a contract agreeing participation, data handling and presentation criteria, or where interviews were conducted over the telephone, verbal assent was recorded. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. The key themes emerging were discussed by the team and a systematic thematic analysis approach was adopted in order to analyse the data (Guest, 2012).

In total, 29 individuals were interviewed from 27 different organisations covering England and Wales. Details of interviewees and their organisations are set out in Table 1. The organisations we interviewed represented a broad spectrum of SCSO activity but were not completely comprehensive. For example, the project was unable to set up interviews with grant-making trusts funding small groups or community organisers.



Clearly, all respondents have some kind of belief set that shaped the nature of the responses they gave to questions. Interviewing individuals who ‘represent’ some part of the SCSO sector or have specialist knowledge in the area comes with a range of limitations as well as strengths. The respondents, used to advocating in their field, may adopt a particular political position, which generalises their experiences of SCSOs. It is possible that they omitted experiences that did not support their overall narrative. By asking for illustrative examples of situations described and enabling respondents to use their own experiences of volunteering for SCSOs, we tried to question their positioning(s) where possible. Our focus on intermediary sources gave us an opportunity to explore their perceptions regarding the discursive incorporation or resistance to incorporation of SCSOs into the governable terrain of policy (Carmel and Harlock, 2008) and thus provides insights into their availability to policy. However, it means that we do not present the minutiae of everyday functioning, which is likely to offer a messier account of contradictions and commonalities than the one we offer.

Interviews took between 45 minutes and two hours and included questions such as: What kind of function(s) do these types of organisations/activities fulfil? What are the main challenges or barriers facing SCSOs and ‘below-the-radar’ community activities? The data represent a set of actors’ views and perceptions that may be confirmed, questioned or even challenged. Indeed, the views expressed were largely positive, portraying SCSOs as inclusive, responsive and flexible. A narrative that recognises that such groups can also be rigid and exclusive, as Pathak and McGhee (2015) argue, was largely absent.

## Role, function and motivation of SCSOs

Most respondents saw SCSOs as a community response to meeting needs that were currently unmet due either to lack of resources or the failure of policy makers to identify and address need. This was particularly the case for organisations that supported minority **[[ethnic?]]** communities who were not connected to mainstream organisations and often experienced highly complex problems, which we were told were outside the scope, attention and focus of established CSOs (Craig, 2011). SCSOs were said to impact at a highly localised level in wide-ranging ways through providing for individual welfare needs such as immediate provision of clothing or food. Considerable emphasis was placed on actively reaching out to isolated individuals or organising activities such as reading groups, which provided a connection between strangers.

Action was said to be most likely to occur where there were no alternatives “when you have no money, no food or you just have to do something” (women’s organisation respondent). Rural respondents commented that community groups were increasingly “filling the gaps left when statutory services withdraw from [rural] areas”. A common problem, whether that was desperation or poverty, was seen as a powerful motivator for activity. Shared anger was sometimes a motivator for action. Some SCSO activity had a social function: “people are group animals and naturally want to come together” (rural respondent). People also combined efforts where there was a common interest. Migrant and refugee community organisation (MRCO) respondents talked about actions occurring to provide mutual aid to new arrivals, unable to locate support elsewhere because they did not have knowledge of the civil society landscape and larger voluntary and statutory organisations lacked the reach, knowledge or language

**Table 1: Background and expertise of the interviewees**

Expertise of interviewees	Scope of organisation	Geographical scope	Number of interviewees
Migrant and refugee communities	Supporting development of migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs)	London	5
	Encouraging partnerships (action-based charity)	National	
	Providing support to MRCOs	England	
	Projects promoting the development of refugee communities	National	
Rural communities	Supporting rural communities to improve access to services	National	5
	Supporting rural community groups and parish councils	England	
	Linking rural groups and government	National	
Development agency	Providing advice, training and advocacy	Regional	4
	Advancing and promoting community development practice	National	
	Championing small asset-owning community-based organisations	National	
	Coordinating community sector voice	England	
Generic umbrella/ membership organisations	Connecting local community development agencies (network)	National	4
	Providing a community voice around regeneration and renewal	National	
	Helping communities to control local assets	National	
	Connecting community groups with local authorities	National	
Black and minority ethnic (BME) focus	Championing the voice of BME SCSOs	National	4
	Academic/practitioner specialising in BME civil society	International	
	Seeking to lead change (think tank)	National	
Policy makers	Government department SCSOs	England and Wales	3
	Government department focusing on regeneration and renewal		
Faith	Community action (multi-faith network)	National	2
	Academic/practitioner with expertise in faith-based organisations	National	
Arts	Representing amateur and grassroots arts groups and organisations	England and Wales	1
Women	Representing women's groups	National	1
Total			29



1 **[[Change ‘Scope of organisation’ to ‘Remit of organisation’ to avoid**  
 2 **repetition of ‘scope’ in the next column?]]**

3 **[[In the policy makers row, ‘Government department SCSOs’ ~ sense**  
 4 **unclear ~ please reword as necessary]]**

5 **[[Please provide clarification as to why e.g. there are 5 interviewees**  
 6 **under migrant and refugee communities and yet only 4 items under**  
 7 **‘scope of organisation’ and ‘geographical scope’ in that row. Or is the table**  
 8 **incomplete? The same query applies to the following rows: Rural, BME**  
 9 **and Policy makers]]**

10  
 11  
 12 skills to understand their needs (McCabe et al, 2013). There was sometimes a cultural  
 13 expectation that support should be provided to “friends I didn’t know .... you have to  
 14 open your door to those in need” (MRCO respondent). Respondents reported that  
 15 political, social, cultural or faith values could drive action. Actors frequently believed  
 16 that they were doing the right thing, for example raising money to send an unwell  
 17 migrant back home. Others may argue that such approaches are unregulated and  
 18 emerge from individual belief systems that do not consider alternative courses of action.

19 Occasionally, actions were initiated after people had seen organisations establish  
 20 elsewhere and were inspired to follow suit. Faith and MRCO respondents talked  
 21 about a “crucible” for action. This could be a location within an area that has a history  
 22 of social action, which is accepting of risk taking, or might be in the early stages of  
 23 diversification. Here new arrivals were said to create life and energy, reproducing  
 24 vibrancy from their home communities and more focused on self-help and providing a  
 25 stimulus for others to become active: “we may as well do it too” (MRCO respondent).

## 26 27 **Distinctiveness** 28

29 Policy respondents argued that the sector was “vital” and “crucial” because of its  
 30 wide reach, responsiveness to emerging problems, flexibility and innovative nature.  
 31 SCSO activities were seen as distinctive from those of formal civil society because  
 32 they used experiential knowledge, and were led by and for communities. Because  
 33 those initiating activity understood and had sometimes themselves lived through  
 34 similar problems, they were trusted and could address the most sensitive of issues, for  
 35 example sexual violence or institutional racism – concerns we were told were not  
 36 necessarily recognised by the formal sector. Such insider knowledge gave SCSOs  
 37 enhanced potential to meet the needs of vulnerable communities.

38 SCSO action was embedded in communities they were connected to, meaning  
 39 they could reach people through localised working. The capacity to understand and  
 40 holistically address complex needs was illustrated by the example of local women’s  
 41 organisations that offered local women escaping domestic violence shelter in their  
 42 own homes, providing them with clothing and food and rapid one-to-one support  
 43 to access benefits and housing. SCSOs apparently worked in a different way from  
 44 mainstream CSOs or the state because they operated on instinct – responding to a  
 45 ‘gut reaction’. **[[the following sentence is a little unclear and doesn’t connect**  
 46 **too well with the previous one ~ possible to rephrase things a little?]]** This  
 47 illustrated by refugee community groups, where challenging a deportation decision  
 48 was seen as unjust, or in rural communities where the withdrawal of local services

threatened communities' quality of life. A rural respondent argued that SCSOs "create genuine personal connections on a level that is appropriate – person-to-person connection that big agencies just cannot do". These dimensions of responsiveness 'on a human scale' were seen as key strengths but interviewees also recognised a potential weakness as groups often lacked resources to respond effectively to growing levels of need (Pathak and McGhee, 2015).

The lack of formal service delivery contracts was said to free SCSOs to resolve problems in innovative ways. Without formality they were uninhibited by bureaucracy, able to act immediately without sanction and thus were said to be more fluid, flexible and informal than constituted organisations. Their ability to target activity exactly where required, and quickly "be fleet-of-foot and more responsive" (rural respondent), meant that SCSOs were better at meeting need, in "hard-to-reach" situations than the state and formal CSOs (MRCO respondent). Dependence on just one or two leaders **[[please clarify here whether you are talking about SCSOs or formal CSOs]]** to decide which person, or which problem, justified their attention risked decision making about 'deservingness' being arbitrary or even politically driven. Further research is needed to examine how such decisions are made.

The ability to operate without regard to "the rules" (development agency respondent) and thus be flexible and challenge the status quo was argued to be important and could enable organisations to be radical. Faith and umbrella respondents stressed the importance of "just being able to get on with it". Without contracts, SCSO activists were said to take risks and were free to lobby and to criticise. As an example, when local people in a village heard that their village would not receive funds for flood defences despite repeated flooding, a local woman formed an action group, using posters to attract support and then fundraising and lobbying the Environment Agency for a change in decision. They questioned the basis on which previous decisions were made, persisting until successful. They then turned their attention to fighting the large-scale housing development imposed on their village in the local plan.

Some respondents described the reluctance of SCSOs to work with policy makers. For example, an MRCO respondent argued that working with policy makers "could force a change in values and priorities". SCSOs only being accountable to their own members enhanced freedom, motivation and effectiveness because they were not beholden to policy agendas or externally imposed targets. However, SCSOs may not necessarily be democratically run or open-minded. While some were organised collectively, others may be **[[change 'may be' to 'were'?]]** controlled by autocratic individuals. They could be inward looking, insular and exclusive and sometimes sought to be 'under the radar' to avoid scrutiny.

Despite their enthusiastic and positive attitudes about the work of SCSOs, respondents also understood their limitations. There was no guarantee that passionate, motivated individuals would do a good job, or that successful activists could become effective managers. Furthermore, faith and black and minority ethnic (BME) respondents agreed that where action occurred was often a "postcode lottery", and may not correspond with need, reflecting some of the concerns expressed in wider discussions around the notion of charity deserts. Further, respondents argued the wide-scale need could only be solved through larger-scale, more strategic investment. Volunteers or support workers were often untrained and inexperienced and could give bad advice or make poor decisions. Power struggles between activists could lead

to organisational failure. SCSOs running children's activities were seen as particularly problematic because they may lack training in safeguarding.

## Resources for SCSO action

SCSO activity harnessed a wide range of resources, with time and expertise particularly important. Volunteering was fundamental to SCSOs, but was unstructured activity, with boundaries between the personal and civic lives of actors somewhat blurred: "it's completely their life ... they never clock off" (development agency respondent). There were no set hours, structure or allocated roles. Volunteers acted when needed, often using their own resources. For example, a neighbourhood organisation relied entirely on donations of time, money, space and expertise from local businesses and residents to collect funds to improve local facilities. MRCO respondents talked of sharing their lives with people in, or on the verge of, destitution, if they came knocking at their door, who they had never met before. Some groups accessed resources from within their communities to pay for actions outside the remit of formal organisations. For example, a Sudanese community donated money to a Sudanese SCSO to pay for a destitute community member to return to the Sudan, while a Pakistani SCSO raised £20,000 from within their own community to build a school in Pakistan. Others gave examples of donations brought to events such as food and musical talents. Many groups depended on some kind of cost-free social space, often in schools or churches, to run their activities or opened their homes for meetings. People used networking skills and persuasion to recruit volunteers with the knowledge or resources they needed and could not afford to purchase.

Lack of money, a challenge commonly identified in the literature (Kendall, 2003; Thompson, 2008), was compounded by a lack of premises, or information technology skills, which hindered many groups from meeting their community's requirements. Most were said to be unable to address the scale of need. Many helped excluded individuals by referring them on to statutory or formal provision, although such activity depended on there being viable services. SCSOs tended to utilise bridging capital by partnering with other community groups rather than linking (Putnam, 2003) **[[please supply reference]]** with local authorities and other bodies. Without such connections, authorities failed to benefit from SCSOs' local knowledge and SCSOs had no influence over wider service provision and had to find ways to resolve people's problems that did not involve the state. The insularity of SCSOs was seen as an indicator that formal organisations and institutions lacked interest in their activities. We suggest that it may also be symptomatic of SCSOs' lack of confidence or skills to engage more widely. Further research is necessary to explore the nature of, and barriers/enablers to, wider interactions.

## Learning for, and from, community action

As noted, throughout the 2000s there was substantial investment in 'capacity building' in the voluntary sector and community groups through formal, often technical, training, which it has been contended ignores adult learning theory (Wenger, 1998; Thomas, 1999). Respondents argued that SCSOs learned through experience and, with the exception of mandatory requirements (such as safeguarding), rarely accessed formal learning opportunities (McCabe and Phillimore, 2012a). Indeed, rather than

approaching voluntary sector development agencies, activists tended to use social networks to access skills and knowledge on an iterative basis. This involved, for example, visiting other community shops, residents' groups or village halls, listening to their experiences and adapting practice to their own particular community context. Peer learning was, therefore, integral to group development. Learning was about being more effective within the community rather than growing their organisation. What emerged, therefore, was a substantial gap between policy expectations about how SCSOs should learn and how they actually used learning to replicate, rather than 'scale up', alternative models of grassroots activity.

## Challenges faced by SCSOs

In addition to the resource problems outlined above, respondents identified a wide range of challenges that SCSOs had to overcome, including pressures to grow and formalise. Respondents argued that growth would distance SCSOs from the communities they represented, and lead to a loss of the unique qualities associated with being "led by local people, for local people" (women's organisation respondent). SCSOs were subject to unrealistic demands on their time from policy makers who wanted them to attend partnership meetings without covering the costs of attendance. Even where there was some dialogue with policy makers, the sheer scale of structural inequalities was argued to continue while SCSOs "pick up the pieces" (BME respondent).

Despite these challenges, respondents felt that SCSO were more sustainable than formal CSOs in a recession. This was because "they are already at the bottom and there is no way down" (BME respondent) and few were dependent on external funding. The ability for activities to come and go according to need was viewed by respondents as important. A faith respondent argued that "true voluntary and community organisations exist because people want them to". Once they were no longer wanted or needed, there was no reason to continue. Sometimes the closure of an organisation was a sign of success: evidence that goals had been met, for example the flood defence campaign cited earlier ceased. Respondents argued that the focus on longevity enforced artificial sustainability on SCSOs, some of which had lost their way and had no real reason to exist.

## Discussion

Respondents argued that SCSOs made an important contribution to the quality of life and wellbeing of individuals and communities. This has been recognised in policy, particularly public health where SCSOs, through their capacity to create and sustain social networks, are promoted as a means of influencing healthy behaviours and, ultimately, relieving pressures on the National Health Service (DH, 2013). Such a policy focus, however often fails to acknowledge that groups, while they may improve participants' wellbeing, were not established to meet policy objectives and cannot address the structural determinants of health inequalities (Friedli, 2012).

A wide range of claims were made by the intermediaries interviewed about the function, distinctiveness and impact of the VCS. Clearly, the nature of those claims varied according to the perspective of the interviewees and the role they undertook. Nonetheless, some generalisations did emerge. SCSOs were seen as being broad in

scope, filling gaps in welfare and service provision both at neighbourhood level and for interest groups, supporting Boateng (2002) and Wuthnow's (2004) claim that SCSOs have the potential to meet specialist need. Their actions were motivated by a desire to solve problems, give voice, help vulnerable people, maintain cultural identity and/or make social connections. Actions emerged from common interests, a common enemy or problem, gaps in service provision and social isolation (Rochester, 2013).

Respondents made the case for SCSOs being distinctive, with boundaries blurred between the personal, the political and civic action (Anderson, 2013). Actions were generally resourced from within communities using time, expertise, social networks and whatever else people could lay their hands on. Respondents claimed that SCSOs were distinctive because of their fluidity and flexibility. Lifecycles of actions varied according to need. Some groups emerged in response to need, and disappeared once the need was addressed. Many actions were ideologically or experientially driven by people who wanted to make a difference to their own lives, or to those of their community (Cooper, 2008; Henderson and Vercseg, 2010). Following Freire (1970), there was evidence that local or community-specific knowledge was the key to SCSO responsiveness. While different types of groups (ie, BME, rural and women's groups) clearly operated within their own specific knowledge base, each used insider knowledge to act. Insider knowledge combined with community embeddedness enabled SCSOs to know which actions would be effective and trusted by the community. Unconstrained by bureaucracy or regulation, SCSOs had autonomy, and scope, to be radical. Respondents argued that complete freedom from hegemony – in the form of government policy – was, as Alinsky (1971) suggested, fundamental to their distinctiveness and effectiveness.

Some actions helped to meet local policy goals, and some groups were able to influence local policy, but on the whole respondents agreed that the lack of set goals enabled SCSOs to meet need effectively and quickly. Respondents felt that much could, and should, be learned from SCSOs, both from their experiential and grounded knowledge, and from their responsive, flexible and holistic approaches to delivery. Yet SCSOs often addressed local problems without having the power to influence the structural issues that underpinned the gaps and needs that they felt compelled to address.

The 'secret' of SCSO success was attracting individuals with the enthusiasm and personality to take people along with them; and the small size of groups and closeness to their constituents. While SCSOs did sometimes help to address policy agendas in employment, renewal and cohesion, it was clear that few respondents saw them as a viable mechanism for large-scale delivery because they lacked the coverage and/or consistency needed. Existence and performance of SCSO action was patchy and not always located in proximity to need. Actions were dependent on the availability, ongoing goodwill and motivation of volunteers. Social action was driven by ideology and aided by sometimes insular social networks. SCSO delivery of policy goals could not be forced through imposing a formalisation agenda or pushing the transfer of local services into the hands of communities. There was support for Mohan's (2012) claims regarding the lack of volunteer capacity. Not all neighbourhoods/interest groups had the desire, resources or capacity to establish or contribute to SCSOs. Not all volunteers had the right characteristics to lead organisations. Furthermore, voluntary labour needed to be coupled with other resources, such as free space, if SCSOs were to be able to operate. The impact of withdrawal of 'in-kind' support (eg, free access

to public buildings) remains an under-researched element of the impact of recession and austerity measures (McCabe and Phillimore, 2012b).

Respondents did indicate that some government initiatives had the potential to enable SCSOs to flourish through the adoption of asset-based approaches to community development models (rather than deficit-based) (Foot and Hopkins, 2010), elements of the localism agenda and the extension of community rights. The right environment depended on significant investment of time, resources or both. Meeting such needs may be difficult as resources continue to decline following long-term austerity measures. The advent of cuts in public services may have a double effect: reduced resources and more disadvantaged citizens. SCSOs will not thrive from support that pushes a particular agenda or from taking on contracts that compel them to deliver services in a particular way (Benson, 2014). Freedom and flexibility appeared to be the key to innovative actions delivered on a small scale but without, necessarily, the capacity to respond to wider needs (Newcastle CVS, 2012).

Thus, rather than moving to roll out service delivery to SCSOs or pushing them to formalise their activities, we argue that policy makers should focus on supporting them to work in their current, distinctive fashion. Policy could provide support by:

- identifying *good practice* in SCSOs;
- making that visible to those working in the sector;
- connecting SCSOs by providing funds for networking and study visits;
- offering free safeguarding and health and safety training;
- making small pots of money available that SCSOs can apply for to cover insurance costs;
- ensuring that there are cost-free spaces in which people can meet.

There are examples of this as a re-emergent approach to SCSOs – generally within the narrow constraints of such activities producing cost savings for the state and bringing added/social value (Fujiwara et al, 2013).

## Conclusion

The data presented within this article bring new knowledge about the importance and distinctiveness of SCSOs. Research with intermediaries has enabled us to gain an overview of some of the strengths and weaknesses of SCSOs and to begin to focus on the potential of this under-researched part of civil society. Despite their diverse nature, it is clear that there are some common features of SCSO activity. While they utilise different and distinct knowledge garnered from lived experience, they do so in a similar way. They share common ground in terms of:

- being led by, and for, their constituents;
- being driven by need;
- responding to gaps in mainstream provision;
- sharing common interests;
- acting holistically and flexibly;
- using resources sourced internally.



It is difficult to argue against increasing the profile of SCSOs. Their distinctive insight into local life could be used in a radical way to shape, rather than deliver, policy, helping to inform on the nature of structural inequality, and to develop solutions on how to address it. Further research is needed to explore directly with SCSOs, the contribution they make within their communities and their views about the roles they might play in relation to policy agendas. It is important to understand their motivations, the barriers they face and their aspirations. Our findings suggest that policy makers need to be mindful that there are limits to what can be achieved by small organisations. Where they do deliver services they do so for and with the public: but these are not public services. Intermediaries in this study felt that there was no appetite, following the Localism Act 2011, to 'scale up' and take on such a role and that SCSOs have their own aspirations regardless of policy discourse. They are unable to provide sufficiently uniform coverage to overcome the structural issues that underpin the social and economic problems they seek to address. Reflecting on the Big Society and subsequent initiatives, Taylor (2011: 262) asks: Will the most vulnerable in society be co-opted into replacing what the state used to provide? ... citizen centred services should not mean people being faced with a choice of providing for themselves or getting nothing'.

Taylor's argument, and that of our respondents, raises questions about where SCSOs can realistically fit in terms of welfare reform. It appears that SCSOs emerge through a complex mix of motivations, aspirations and experience that may be hard to manufacture. It is unlikely to be possible to force the development of SCSOs or to expect local people everywhere to deliver services that will meet the needs of everyone. Ultimately, the vibrancy of SCSOs depends on people having the skills, motivation, time, resources and choice to contribute. Policy makers may consider that, as our respondents suggest, co-option of social action is likely to undermine it (Ledwith, 2005). Rather than co-opt they might develop mechanisms to listen to the voices of SCSOs, which, we suggest, may be an early-warning system for the emergence, or expansion of, social problems, given that they work so closely with their constituents. Any attempt to force growth in SCSOs, or to change their role and function, is likely to disempower communities and inhibit the organic emergence of social action that Freire (1970) and Ledwith (1997) argue is critical to citizen control. While support for SCSOs appears to be important in contributing to the quality of community life, imposing policy agendas may impact on the ways of working that make some SCSOs effective in getting into the places that the state and formal civil society cannot reach and undermine attempts to rebalance the relationship between people and the state (Chanan and Miller, 2010). In short, SCSOs may be important for a healthy and vibrant society, but are unlikely to be a panacea for all society's ills.

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